

Working with eco-emotions: A guide for educators

It might feel daunting to consider how to help children manage feelings when you're struggling to deal with eco-emotions yourself.

Eco-anxiety is a 'chronic fear of environmental doom', that can 'flare up', affecting thought processes and daily functioning or simply simmer in background, as a nagging 'knowing'. However, there are a recognised range of 'eco-emotions', that will affect educators teaching as well as the students we support.

This guide, written by an Educational Psychologist and ex-science teacher, will talk you through what eco-emotions are, things to consider, and how to work with them. There are practical strategy recommendations throughout the guide which are relevant for both educators and students.



All feelings are valid.





What are eco-emotions?

The Climate Psychologists (Kennedy-Woodard & Kennedy-Williams, 2022) stress the adaptiveness of eco-anxiety. It is not a pathological problem or diagnosis, more an **understandable response** to a valid existential threat.

Emotional responses are more complex than just anxiety, and unmanaged eco-anxiety may sometimes develop into other emotions (e.g. depression, Scriberas & Fernando, 2021). This has led to the recognition of a new lexicon of 'eco-emotions', with some examples below (e.g. Coffey et al., 2021).

MEASURING ECOANXIETY

Researchers are developing scales to try to capture 'eco-emotions' (e.g. Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Hogg et al. 2021)

Given the fast pace of change of the context of climate change, it seems unlikely that the concept will ever be meaningfully standardised.

Rather than trying to compare or rate eco-emotions between pupils, scales may be useful to monitor change following intervention. See the Appendix for an example to use.

COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT	1	2	3	4	5
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Thinking about climate change makes it difficult for me to concentrate					
Thinking about climate change makes it difficult for me to sleep					
I have nightmares about climate change					
I find myself crying because of climate change					
I think, "why can't I handle climate change better?"					
I get busy by myself and think about why I feel this way about climate change					
I write down my thoughts about climate change and reduce them					
I think, "why do I need to climate change this way?"					



Eco-emotion	Definition
Meteoranxiety	Anxiety stemming from the increased frequency of extreme weather events. e.g. experiencing a flare up of climate anxiety during a heat wave
Eco-paralysis	Inability, due to fear or hopelessness, to respond to environmental problems. Often associated with the thought 'it won't make a difference'
Eco-guilt	Guilt over wanting to do something for the planet but not acting on it. e.g. feeling bad about flying or driving a petrol car
Solastalgia or 'eco greif'	Distress caused by the ongoing loss and grief of a place that's being irreversibly altered. e.g. noticing about bird migratory patterns changing / population decline.
Terrafurie or 'eco anger'	Anger, shared by many activists, over the damage done to the planet. This can often be directed at groups e.g. 'politicians', 'older people'.
Eco-anxiety or climate anxiety	Chronic fear of environmental doom. Anxiety over anthropogenic climate change

These emotional responses may fluctuate and interact with each other. It's probably not helpful to try over-categorise them in a person, but just be aware that the emotional picture may be complicated and change depending on external events.

Some **emotions may be helpful**. Feelings of anger have been associated with engagement in positive climate action (Stanley et al. 2021), while facing grief may prevent the mechanisms of denial from kicking into action.

Eco-anxiety, however, seems to be the most discussed term, often serving as an umbrella term to capture much of the above.



Recommendations: A culture of emotional expression

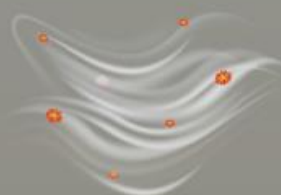


Acceptance of feelings:

- Communicate that **all feelings are valid**. Sometimes we think anger is unacceptable, but anger often is just masking pain and helplessness. Try to take it personally if students are angry at you - they're probably expressing righteous anger at the 'older generations'
- The aim isn't to 'get rid' of difficult feelings, so **resist the temptation to provide false hope**
- Try reframeing distress as a positive thing - '**Eco-emotions show you care** and can have be motivating' (Pihkala, 2020)
- **Model sharing some of your own feelings**. If appropriate, using some of the eco-emotions words, above, may normalise feelings

Give pupils' feelings a voice:

- Don't assume that you know **what someone is feeling** - **ask about students' feelings and experiences**, both before and after teaching climate change
- Use **visual and kineasthetic feelings prompts** if pupils need help articulating feelings e.g. describing feelings as weather, feelings wheel, get them to stand in a line of a 'scale of worry', or complete the questionnaire in the Appendix if appropriate
- Formalise student voice through an '**eco-council**' to represent views



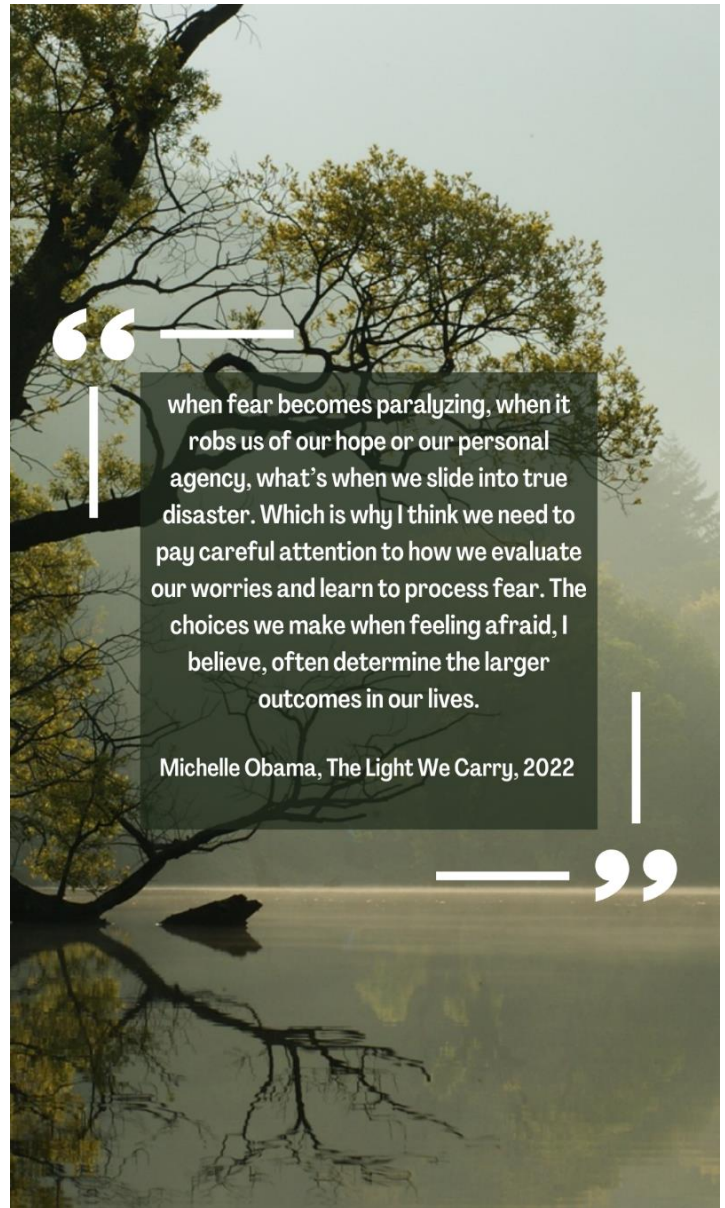


Isn't eco-anxiety a privilege?

Yes. In the sense that it implies only awareness of climate impacts, not actual experiences of life altering consequences. The direct impacts of climate change are being felt acutely in many parts of the globe, often in communities and populations that did least to produce historical carbon emissions. The psychological impacts of floods, direct heat and wildfires are significant and lead to 'cascading' secondary consequences that can include famine, economic collapse, mass migration, and war (Wallis-Wells, 2019).

Moreover, it is understood that climate change impacts will widen existing social inequalities within countries, as disadvantaged people tend to be more exposed and susceptible, having fewer resources for recovery and coping (Islam & Winkel, 2017).

This is the '**Climate Justice**' agenda, which needs to be understood by all in order to provide support for policies that take account of the complex socio-political factors involved in climate change mitigation and adaption efforts.



when fear becomes paralyzing, when it robs us of our hope or our personal agency, what's when we slide into true disaster. Which is why I think we need to pay careful attention to how we evaluate our worries and learn to process fear. The choices we make when feeling afraid, I believe, often determine the larger outcomes in our lives.

Michelle Obama, *The Light We Carry*, 2022

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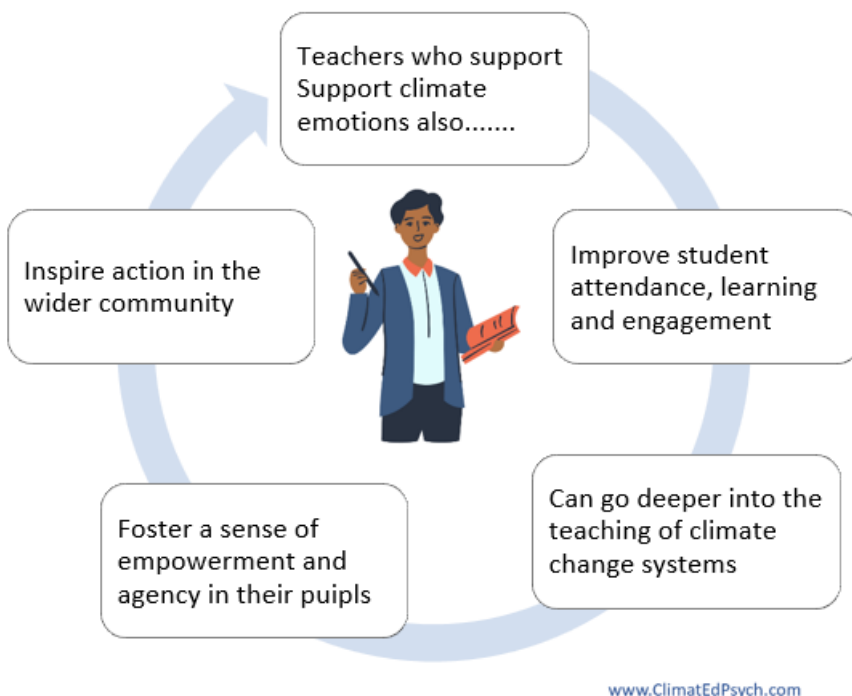
* Those least affected by climate impacts have a responsibility to use their privilege for mitigation actions for all; this will not be effective from an individualistic mindset of self-preservation and fear. *

Although not considered in this guide, direct impacts, adaptation and climate justice are undoubtedly more pressing issues than the eco-emotions of people who are less affected. However, we can be in a better state to support others if we attend to our own feelings first.



Paralysing fear or depression is not helpful for climate action, learning or general wellbeing.

In the wrong hands (think: social media, AI), climate education can engender misinformation, fear and fatalism, leaving people less able to think clearly and more likely to be manipulated.



The good news is that

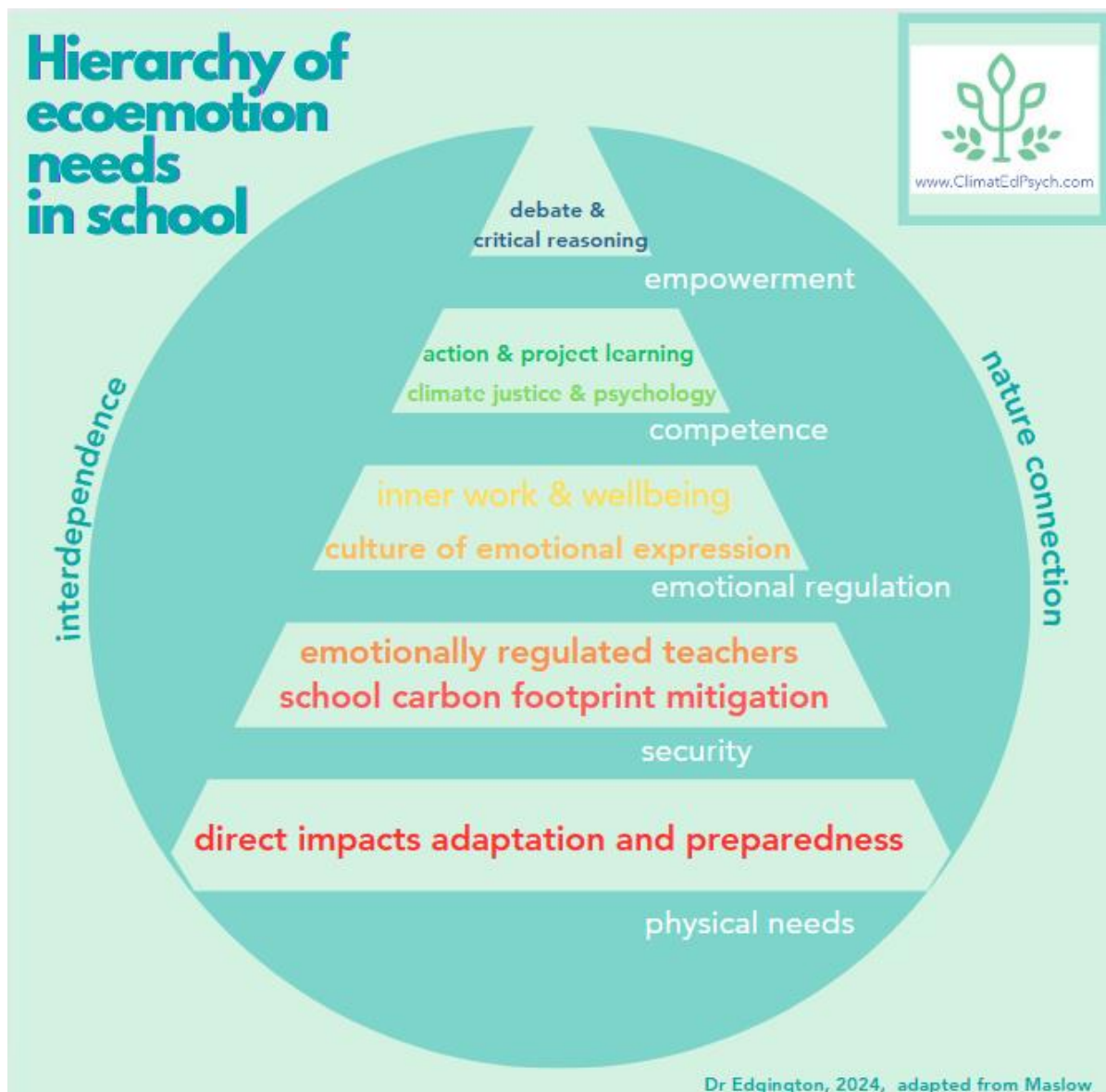
Educators are uniquely placed

to support young people in a **virtuous cycle** of emotional regulation, critical engagement in climate change complexity, empowering action, agency and progress towards sustainability.



The key is containment, meaning that adults are available, empathic and not overwhelmed or triggered by young people's emotions, but able to **'hold space'** for them. They also **model** the self-care and self-regulatory habits we would like the students to have.

Then, when students are educated in an environment where adults are keeping them safe, listening, and teaching them relevant skills and working on positive change together, many of the fears around climate change may not develop in the first place.





Recommendations:

A supportive context and educator inner work



Organisational and community engagement:

- Introduce climate emotions and climate justice in **assemblies, newsletter, form time**, and in **displays** around the school
- Ask and stay mindful of the **experiences of families** in most affected populations and areas
- Consider ways to **involve parents**, including coffee mornings, surveys and invitations to share views, volunteer and get involved
- Senior management to appoint a **sustainability lead** on the senior leadership team (as per DfE guidance, 2022), who is also able to take on a pastoral/eco-emotion role. They should get **protected time** for the role, and have a **team** that includes representation from **estates management**, teaching team, governors, parents and the student body

Staff self-care and support

- Educators **need protected time**, training and opportunities to work on their **own eco-emotions** (see further guidance below)
- Signposting or seek sources of **additional support** if necessary. e.g. Climate Psychology Alliance
- Peer support groups in school (e.g. ClimatEdPsych **Climate staffroom** sessions) to share and air issues arising
- If you staff having a particularly strong 'flare up' of eco-emotions, **delay** teaching climate related topics or **source lesson cover** until they are feeling more grounded, if possible





How to work with eco-emotions

1. Managing emotional 'flare ups'
2. Avoiding thinking traps
3. Habits for emotional resilience

While the aim is not to suppress or change an emotion, there are some habits we can learn to move through emotions with more ease so we can still function and be useful.

The suggestions below are relevant to both students and adults. Educators are encouraged to engage with these ideas for themselves, so they can model it authentically for young people.



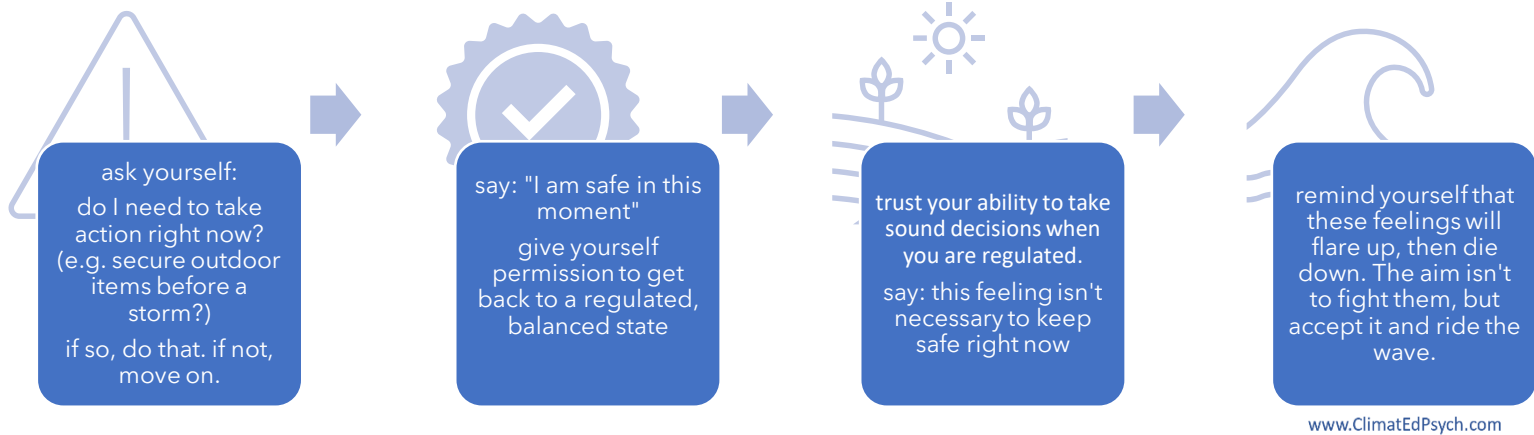
1. Managing emotional 'flare ups': Regulating the nervous system

When an existential threat is perceived, our sympathetic nervous system is triggered (fight, flight, freeze response).

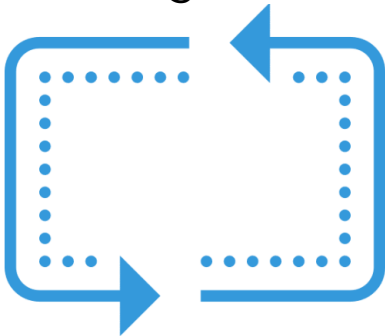
While this system is useful to respond to imminent threat (like an attacker), it does not help with taking the positive action and decisions needed to tackle climate change. Being in this state long term can lead to mental health difficulties and a lack of action.

Sometimes the knowledge that climate change is a real existential threat can serve to prolong or maintain anxiety cycles.

However, we need to distinguish the threat *right now* and threat more generally. It can be helpful to run through the 'self-talk' in the flow chart below before self-regulatory /grounding activities.



Breathing exercises



- Box breathing. In, hold. Out, hold. Repeat.



- Finger breathing. Trace your fingers slowly, breathe in for up and out for down

Self-regulation / grounding activities

These mimic the body's parasympathetic nervous system when calm and relaxed, so send signals to the brain to get back into that state.

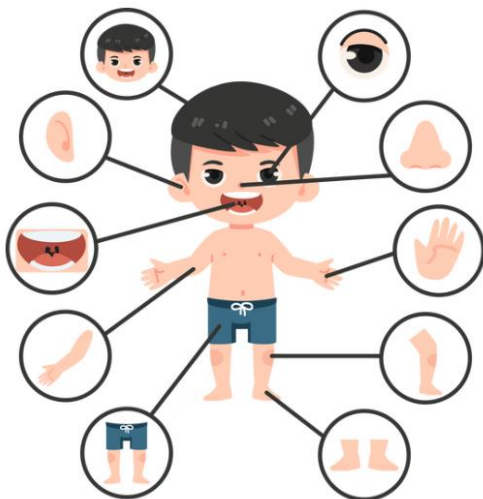
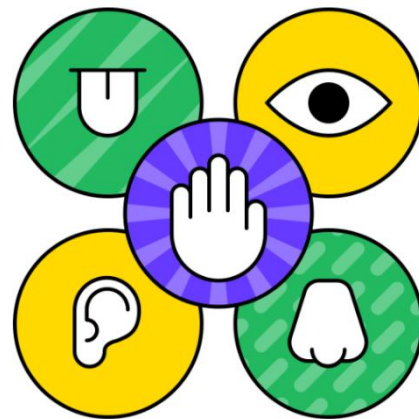
These are child friendly examples and not climate specific, so do use your own preferred method if you have one.

Breathing techniques are generally considered best for panic-like feelings.



Attention to the present moment/ cognitive distraction

- List: 5 things you can see, 4 things you feel 3 you hear, 2 you smell, 1 you taste
- [Tapping/ emotion freedom technique](#)
- Going for a walk
- Getting out in nature



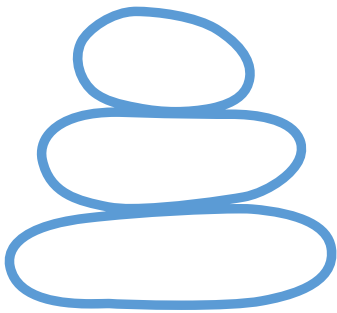
Muscle relaxation

- Bath /self-massage
- Hold and release body parts in turn, working up your body (progressive muscle relaxation)



Recommendations:

Self-regulating anxiety flare-ups

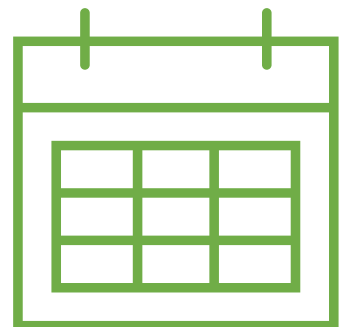


Teach and Practise self-regulation :

- Try and practise self-regulatory breathing, cognitive and muscular relaxation **techniques for yourself**. You may need to repeat them, or try different combinations
- Teach and **practise them with young people** before climate topics, asking them which kind of approach they prefer.
- Small groups tend to work better, to minimise giggling and distractions, but allow students to have fun with it

Routines and normalising

- It can be helpful to incorporate these exercises into **daily routines** (e.g. after breaktime)
- It may also be a good idea to '**sandwich**' **relaxation exercises** before and after difficult teaching topics, that may be upsetting to some people.
- Alternatively, if you notice someone is upset, or the class is a bit agitated, hold a mini 'self-regulation break'.





2. Avoiding thinking traps

While it is acknowledged that eco-anxiety isn't due to 'faulty thinking', there are some thinking habits that can reinforce the anxiety and make it worse than it needs to be.

Thinking traps are often shortcuts that oversimplify a complex situation, rather than reflect reality. Meditation can help us notice our thoughts and understand if we are falling into one of the 'thinking traps', below.



Climate Change Thinking Traps



Saviour Complex

- e.g. "I've got to convince them"
- Overassuming responsibility
 - Can lead to burn out.
- You don't have to save the world



Selective attending & doomscrolling

- e.g. "governments are doing nothing"
- Excessive 'bad' news consumption
 - Linked to poor mental health
 - It can warp your worldview



Catastrophising & Fatalism

- e.g. "what's the point, we're all doomed"
- Can lead to 'giving up',
 - Can cause demotivate others
- Projections are not fact, the reality is more complex



Foreboding Joy (Brown, 2015)

- Hypervigilance
 - Always on on look out for threats
 - Being unable to relax and enjoy life
 - Can lead to burn out.



Overgeneralising & the myth of self interest (Miller & Ratner, 1998)

- e.g. "people only care about themselves"
- Tend to over-estimate others' self-interest



Black and White thinking all or nothing thinking

- e.g. "governments are doing nothing"
- reality is more complex and 'greyscale'



Emotional Reasoning

- e.g. "I am scared of X, that's the risk worst fears often reflect past experiences we can't know for sure what is most likely"



Recommendations: Avoiding thinking traps



Celebrate progress & limit 'news'

- **Limit your news** consumption to 10 mins daily.
- Look for **positive, balancing news** e.g. Nexus, Earthshot prize, HappyEcoNews
- Thank other people for their pro-environmental efforts and celebrate them. Consider engaging in the DfE's Climate Leaders' Award, and share school progress in assembly, and parent news letter,
- Look at **past examples of social change** with pupils (e.g. Ozone layer, smoking ban in UK)

A balanced perspective

- It can be helpful to remember that you are only **responsible for yourself and your actions**. You don't have to save the world and we can't control other people - only influence them
- Through that, you may influence other people. Sometimes in ways you don't even realise. Trust in the **social comparison effect** - we tend to copy each other
- We **might not even know what is 'best'**. Read the old Zen story to students: Good luck, bad luck, who knows?



Reframe faulty thinking:

- If a pupil (or yourself) has an unhelpful thinking pattern (e.g. nothing I do makes a difference), acknowledge the validity of their concerns then see if you can **modify the statement**, 'one step at a time' to take reality into account..

"World leaders are failing to make the changes necessary.

Our democracy is too 'short termist'."

"Some leaders are making small changes that have been resisted as they penalise certain groups (e.g. ULEZ, gilet Jaune in France)"

"The cost of sustainable behaviours will come down as more people adopt different behaviours and investment is made.

We are in a transition period"

"Social change and business is driven by people power. as momentum grows, demand changes..

our voices, votes and buying habits make a difference."

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One step at a time



3. Habits for emotional resilience

It is inevitable that there will be 'triggers', that provoke an increase in climate anxiety.

However, the intensity of feelings can be somewhat reduced by adopting these well-being habits.

Practising regular self care habits will increase our 'window of tolerance' and enable us to return to the calmer 'rest and digest' state more quickly.

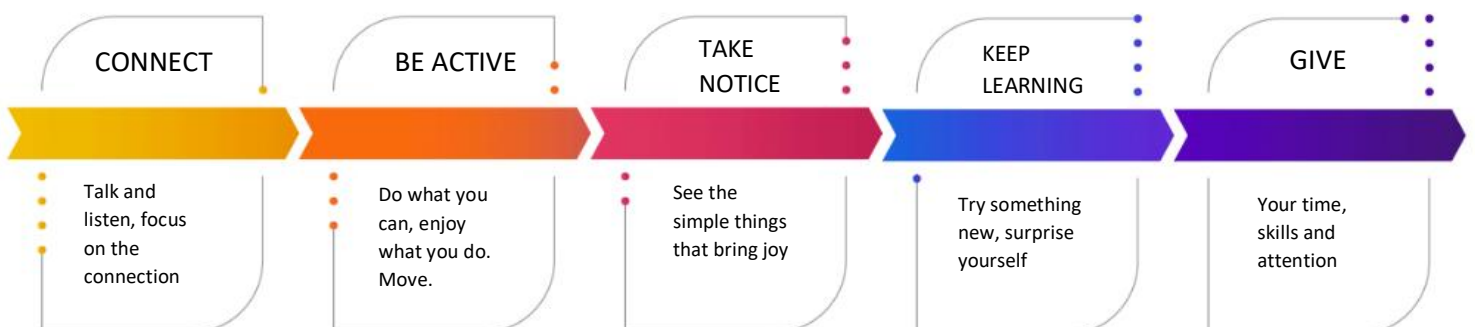
Take care of yourself

It might sound obvious, but being tired, too hot or cold, hungry, dehydrated or in pain can really make it harder to manage feelings.

As well as attending to our basic needs, we have physical, psychological and social needs that the New Economics Foundation have identified as being key to wellbeing:



5 ways to wellbeing:





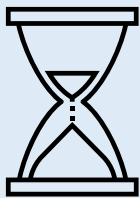
Sit with your feelings

Just because we all have feelings, it doesn't mean that we are all practised in *feeling* them.

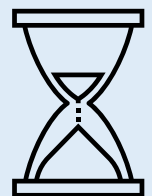
Western culture seems to think that we should be happy all the time, so many of us tend to try to push away unpleasant feelings, often using distractions (phone) or substances to 'self soothe'.

The trouble is that this can cause you to react in an 'outburst' later, as you have unprocessed emotions & thought patterns. It can also lead to an increased level of cortisol (stress hormone) and muscular tension to be 'stored' in your body, causing longer term illnesses.

The feeling will keep on 'reappearing' until it has been 'allowed' to run its course.



Did you know?



If you actually 'sit with a feeling' and let it be there (without wishing it away, or thinking it's terrible), a feeling 'cycle' is believed to only last 90 seconds (Rosenberg 2019).



R. recognise what's going on. E.g. I'm feeling sad or anxious.

A. allow the feeling to be there

I. investigate where it might be with kindness. Is there tension somewhere in the body?

N. nurture and soothe the feeling and yourself. www.tarabrach.com

Acceptance does not mean being ok with climate change – it means acknowledging the reality of what has happened so far. You don't have to like it.

There is much to grieve with climate change impacts. It is important to make space for these feelings when they arise. (n.b. Grieve what is already lost, not future projections as they are not fact.)

It may also help to think about feelings like waves, that come and go





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Some people find it helpful to 'welcome' their eco-emotions and say 'thank you' to them.

Eco-emotions can show us that we have empathy, point to what we really value and give us motivation and strength to fight for what we care about

Get comfortable with uncertainty!

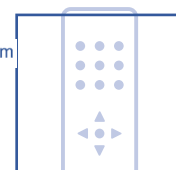
We live in a time where we make schedules, buy insurance, follow regulations, and research reviews, all to make our lives more predictable and 'safe'.

However, even with the best planning and preparation, life is inherently uncertain. This is going to become even more the case as the impacts of climate change and A.I. make uncertainty and change the norm.

It would be helpful for students to see educators who can accept change and think flexibly.



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Recommendations: Habits for resilience



Basic Needs

- Tend to your own **basic needs** and be vigilant for pupils who may be tired & hungry. Ask for help if you need it
- Keep a **thermometer** in your classroom, and regulate the temperature. Allow '**bio breaks**' if pupils need water, or the toilet
- Practise the **5 ways to wellbeing** yourself and teach it to pupils. e.g. You could incorporate 'take notice' into taking the registrar - pupils say one thing they have noticed / appreciated

Sit with your feelings

- Try to **notice** how you react when anxious (pick up the phone/ self-medicate?). See how it feels to not do that even for 1 minute. You can't change a habit without awareness
- Try R.A.I.N. meditations with yourself and pupils to develop the skill of **being with feelings**. (e.g. free meditations on InsightTimer)
- **Welcome all the feelings** and thank them for showing you what you care about. Never tell a pupil to 'cheer up' or 'stop crying'.
- **Emotion coaching** is a helpful approach when dealing with young people's feelings. e.g. emotioncoachinguk.com



Get Comfortable with uncertainty

- Notice how well you adapt to changes in routine. **Practise sitting with uncertainty** by trying out new things from time to time. Anxiety Canada have some helpful resources on this.
- Model adaptability for pupils by **keeping abreast of developments** and learning new skills.
- You could ask pupils **hypothetical questions** to help them consider change e.g. what could you do if the car broke down/ the train was cancelled?



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Appendix

CLIMATE CHANGE ANXIETY SCALE CLAYTON & KARAZSIA (2020)

COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT	1 Never	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Often	5 Always
Thinking about climate change makes it difficult for me to concentrate.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Thinking about climate change makes it difficult for me to sleep.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have nightmares about climate change	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I find myself crying because of climate change	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think, “why can’t I handle climate change better?”	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I go away by myself and think about why I feel this way about climate change	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I write down my thoughts about climate change and analyze them	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think, “why do I react to climate change this way?”	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Total cognitive Impairment (8-40)					
Higher scores indicate greater anxiety affecting thought processes		<input type="text"/>			



CLIMATE CHANGE ANXIETY SCALE CLAYTON & KARAZSIA (2020)

FUNCTIONAL IMPAIRMENT

1 2 3 4 5
Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

My concerns about climate change make it hard for me to have fun with my family or friends.

☐☐☐☐☐

I have problems balancing my concerns about sustainability with the needs of my family

☐☐☐☐☐

My concerns about climate change interfere with my ability to get work or school assignments done.

☐☐☐☐☐

My concerns about climate change undermine my ability to work to my potential.

☐☐☐☐☐

My friends say I think about climate change too much

☐☐☐☐☐

Total Functional Impairment

Higher scores indicate greater anxiety affecting thought processes